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\$2.3B Ronkonkoma redevelopment project gets Suffolk County's support



Besides a new terminal at Long Island MacArthur Airport, the project would include a 300-room hotel and a sports complex with indoor and outdoor arenas. Credit: James Carbone

By Brinley Hineman and Carl MacGowan

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The Suffolk County Legislature threw its support Tuesday behind a plan to work with Islip Town on a \$2.3 billion Ronkonkoma redevelopment project that includes a convention center, health sciences center and a northern terminal at Long Island MacArthur Airport.

Lawmakers voted 17-0, with one abstention, to approve an intermunicipal agreement with Islip to build the 3.1 million-square-foot Midway Crossing complex, which would connect the new terminal to the Ronkonkoma Long Island Rail Road station. The project also would include a 300-room hotel and a sports complex with indoor and outdoor arenas.

Supporters of the plan, including business leaders and tourism advocates, call the development a transformational project that will add thousands of jobs to the region, including some with six-figure annual salaries.

The plan, expected to take 15 years to complete, faces numerous questions about financing and its impact on infrastructure. County officials have said existing parking lots must be replaced and the Islip composting facility must be relocated as part of the project. Officials are eyeing federal stimulus money to fund the project.

"Today's vote represents an important milestone for this regionally significant project," said county spokesman Derek Poppe.

A Town of Islip spokeswoman said officials there were "pleased the county has taken this first step in exploring a potentially transformative project."

The development will require approvals from town, county and state agencies, and the Federal Aviation Administration, officials have said.

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Despite approving the agreement, Suffolk lawmakers raised questions about its impact on the environment and whether the public was adequately informed about the project. A scheduled vote on the agreement was postponed last month over complaints by Republicans that they had not been briefed on the plan.

"We very much support this project," Legis. Bridget Fleming (D-Noyac) said during the meeting. "But we want to ensure that every community is considered, and that, certainly, environmental impacts in communities that might not have historically had a say in what ends up in their backyards do have a say in this instance."

Legis. Anthony Piccirillo (R-Holbrook), whose district borders the development zone, told Newsday he abstained from voting because nearby Holbrook's fire department and chamber of commerce had been left out of discussions.

Construction of the development will be overseen by Chicago-based developer Jones Lang LaSalle, which was tapped by Islip in October to serve as master developer of the MacArthur terminal. The company, which was project manager of the \$1 billion renovation of Madison Square Garden, was named by the county in 2018 to lead the Ronkonkoma redevelopment.

"This was the gate that opens the process to further engage with the community," Jones Lang LaSalle vice chairman Derek Trulson told Newsday, referring to Tuesday's vote. "We're excited. We think it's a first big step. It's the most important step so far to get the county and the town aligned."

Matthew Cohen, executive director of the Long Island Association, the region's largest business group, hailed Midway Crossing as "the kind of development that will reverberate for generations on Long Island."

Former Suffolk economic development director Martin Cantor, who said he had prepared a study of the project's economic impact for Jones Lang LaSalle, said the project was "an absolute no-brainer for Suffolk County and the Town of Islip." Cantor, a critic of an earlier version of the plan, said the revamped proposal would have an annual economic impact of \$2.74 billion, including the creation of 3,000 construction jobs and 5,500 permanent jobs.

Cantor said he no longer works as a consultant on the project.

"This is something that will build on Long Island's strength," Cantor said. "We pride ourselves in tech and biotech. This builds on it. This is really next-generation."

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